

LOCAL NEWS

THE POLICE: Busting meth labs blamed for health problems

By **PRESS-ENTERPRISE**

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OREM, UTAH – Officer Terry Sparks says he feels like he was beaten with a sledgehammer.

The pounding headache was bad enough, but the surging nausea made it almost unbearable. He gathered his energy and once again entered the nondescript clinic in this rural community south of Salt Lake City.

The side effects of his treatment there are a price he is willing to pay to purge his body of toxins he believes have built up in his system after years of exposure to meth labs laden with poisonous chemicals and fumes.

"I had my doubts when I heard about it," said Sparks, 45. "... If it doesn't work, I'm not out anything but time. If it works, then my quality of life will improve."

Sparks, a veteran narcotics officer, is in the Utah Meth Cops Project, a four-week program whose techniques were created by L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. The project aims to rid officers' bodies of poisonous chemicals they believe were absorbed during their investigations of countless meth labs.

Supporters say it is simply a miracle. Some critics question its effectiveness and say there is no scientific evidence it works, or even that the officers' ailments are caused by their lab work.

For Sparks and the others, the program provides a glimmer of hope as they deal with a list of ailments and illnesses — including headaches, sore joints, breathing problems, insomnia and acid reflux — that they believe were caused by exposure to meth labs. Some have lost lung capacity — up to 30 percent — and developed lesions in their esophagus.

Who It Helps

Sparks is among hundreds of narcotics investigators throughout the country who have been exposed to methamphetamine and believe the work has made them sick.

At the height of the meth lab epidemic during the 1990s, the number of labs in Utah increased dramatically — but still didn't reach the number in the Inland area, where agencies investigated hundreds of labs annually.

Officials with the Utah project say police officers from other states, particularly California, could benefit from the program, but there are no current plans to expand it beyond the Orem facility or to officers from other states.

The project is paid for through a \$50,000 grant from the Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice in Utah. A second grant for \$140,000 came from the Utah attorney general's office and \$100,000 has been promised from the Utah Legislature.

About 23 officers have gone through the program, with nearly all reporting a substantial improvement in their overall health, according to project administrator Sandra Lucas.

Ten officers who went through the program first were asked to describe various ailments, such as joint pain, headaches and breathing problems, and compare them at the end of the program to what it was like at the start, Lucas said. The officers reported a 75 percent reduction in symptoms, including sore joints and headaches.

Critics have questioned the effectiveness of the program, saying the toxins that made their way into the officers' bodies would have been absorbed or flushed out through urine, sweat or other means over the years. Some say that there is no scientific evidence linking the officers' health issues with their exposure to meth labs, and that there is not enough data to show the project could work on a large scale.

While supporters of the program concede that the officers' lab exposure hasn't been proved to have caused their health issues, the ingredients used to make the drug are known to cause problems.

Red phosphorus is one of the key ingredients in the production of meth, and is found in almost every lab. A report by the Michigan Department of Community Health said that contacting, inhaling or ingesting red phosphorus can irritate the skin, eyes, upper respiratory tract and mucous membranes. Red phosphorus can also cause bronchitis if inhaled and stomach pain, diarrhea and vomiting if ingested. Chronic exposure may cause kidney and liver damage, anemia, and blood and cardiovascular disorders.

Officials at the University of Utah's Rocky Mountain Center for Occupational and Environmental Health are conducting the first study in the U.S. to determine whether certain health problems are connected to exposure to meth labs. Officials are studying thousands of officers in Utah — those exposed to labs and not — and hope to have the results before the end of the year. The study will cost more than \$500,000 and is being funded by the state of Utah.

"I don't care what anyone says; it changed my life," said Kelly Call, 54, a former Utah state officer who investigated hundreds of labs during the 1990s and suffered from constant headaches. Call was in the first group of officers to go through the detoxification.

"I look forward to getting up in the morning," he said. "I can make it through the day without taking a handful of ibuprofen."

How It Works

The Utah Meth Cops Project is modeled after a detoxification system developed by Hubbard. Scientology is a worldwide religion with millions of followers, including many celebrity members such as Tom Cruise and John Travolta.

Hubbard wanted a program to help potential members purge themselves of the drugs they had ingested so they could focus on his teachings, Lucas said. She said Scientology is not part of the Utah Meth Cops Project.

The technique was also used on about 1,000 rescue workers who responded to the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and developed health problems.

Participants start each day by answering a laundry list of questions, dealing with everything from eating habits to sleep patterns. The officers then take several vitamins, including niacin, which promotes sweating. The dosage of niacin is increased over the four weeks of the program.

After taking the vitamins, they begin a regimen of moderate exercise for about 30 minutes. They ride stationary bicycles or walk the treadmill, just enough to get their heart rates going.

Participants then spend the next few hours in and out of a 160-degree dry sauna, sweating out what operators of the project believe are the toxins that have been stored in fat cells.

"You get a lot of weird stuff that comes out of you," said Ryan Porter, an officer with the Orem Police Department, who has investigated more than 150 labs in his 17-year law enforcement career. Porter said a crystal-like substance came from his tear ducts during one sauna session. "I guess that means it's working."

A short time later, Porter sat in the sauna, a towel wrapped around his body, his shaved head crisscrossed by lines of sweat. His eyes were closed as he leaned his head back against the wall. He was soon joined by others, each in different stages of the program. They bantered back and forth, the talk sometimes salty.

Some of the officers have reported an ammonia smell in their sweat. Call said a dark substance showed up during one of his sauna sessions.

The process can be hard on the body.

Sparks, who had been in the program for 20-plus days, said he spent most of a sleepless night tossing and turning. He considered taking the day off, but decided to give it a try.

"Maybe I'll feel better after the sauna," he said, trying to hold his head up.

Lucas said the program lasts an average of 33 days, although it can take longer.

Dr. Raymond Harbison, director of the Center for Environmental/Occupational Risk Analysis and Management at the University of South Florida, said the premise of the program is scientifically flawed. The chemicals that officers would have been exposed to during their drug lab work, he said, would have been purged naturally from their bodies within a short period.

"To apply this years later makes no sense," Harbison said.

Harbison said he'd be more supportive if there was evidence that levels of certain chemicals — those that could adversely affect the officers' health — are lower once participants are done with the program.

Lucas said program technicians are taking urine, blood and tissue samples before and after the officers go through the program to compare the data. The information is still being collected and has not been analyzed.

Harbison does not dispute that participants feel better after taking part in the program, but said it may have more to do with the fact that they are eating better, exercising and taking vitamins.

"They want to believe it will work," he said.

Why Some Get Sick

Not every officer who investigated meth labs has become ill, even those who have been exposed to hundreds or thousands of them. For those who do, it may not be until years later, Lucas said, and some never make the connection between their health problems and the lab work.

Dr. Gerald Ross, medical director for the project, said those who suffer ill effects from meth lab exposure may have a genetic makeup that makes them more sensitive to the chemicals stored in their system.

Ross compared it to how some people become ill in an office when it is painted, while others have no problems working even with fumes from the drying paint. Few people would argue that smoking is bad for someone's health, he said, but not everyone who smokes develops cancer or emphysema.

Despite the concerns of critics, Lucas hopes the program will expand beyond Utah.

"We want to eventually help as many cops as possible," she said. "... They deserve it."

RESOURCES

Utah Meth Cops Project: www.utah-detox.org

American Detoxification Foundation/UMCP:

P.O. Box 522169

Salt Lake City, UT 84152-2169

Telephone: 801-484-1430

Health Study: The University of Utah's Rocky Mountain Center for Occupational and Environmental Health is conducting a study to try to determine whether there is a connection between certain illnesses and the work of police officers and firefighters exposed to meth labs. The study is expected to be completed by October.

<http://uuhsc.utah.edu/rmcoh>



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